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Feeding Animals
by S. Ray Granade
7/8/2017

When the Evergreen Baptist Church sold its old pastorium, diagonally southwest across the street from the “church plant” as the complex of buildings was customarily called, it built a new one on McMillan Street in the old part of town. Lore had it that the street running north and south along the ridge had been named Main Street because that had originally been town’s focus as the Brooklyn-to-Lyeffion road where it crossed US Highway 31. When the railroad came through slightly to the west, commercial Evergreen had simply picked up and moved, leaving Main as a residential street. Thus streets around Main did not square with those around the railroad. McMillan ran west at right angles from Main, heading down the hill and then up again to a stop sign on Shipp Street.

The blocks between Main and Shipp on McMillan were irregular because of the streets, and because the older houses rested on much larger lots. Tal and Mary Stuart lived on the block’s south side in what appeared to be a middling large brick house on a huge lot, for the south-side block was larger than its sister to the north. The church bought an undeveloped lot in the middle of the north side for its pastorium. The driveway formed the lot’s western boundary and left the street at its absolutely lowest point. Going downhill from that point was only possible southward, following a drainage channel across one end of the Stuart’s lot.

The new pastorium, built about 1953, was a two-story (one at ground level on its east end with full basement accessible through either of the two garage doors on the west side at ground level) structure on its own large lot well above street level. To the west was a large vacant lot, to the north a two-story house separated from the pastorium lot by a tremendously tall privet hedge, and to the east two houses that fronted on Main. The house on the corner was an old two-story wooden Victorian structure. Beside it, apparently squatting in its shadow, was the single-story house with a large front porch that belonged to Mrs. Newton.

Although we were side-lot neighbors, I knew little about Mrs. Newton save the externals. She lived alone (I assumed that she was a widow) and in her detached garage sat an old car I coveted. I learned from the cemetery years later that her name was Jeretta and that she was older than my grandparents—though even growing up I knew her as old. She had a holdover from an earlier era, a scuppernong arbor, in her backyard, and as long as we asked, she never minded us sampling what Daddy persisted in calling bullises (or bullaces). My own life was full of activities and people and it never occurred to me that her frequent sharing of food (usually some form of sweet) was for her a different holdover from an earlier era. Her

offerings remained a way to express love without saying it directly—behavior common in women of my acquaintance rooted in the end of the Victorian era and not uncommon in their daughters.

Mrs. Newton had no pets, but I enjoyed a succession of free-range dogs and occasional other creatures (a baby squirrel and some fish, though never cats). Both Pug and Tip shared our home while Mrs. Newton was our neighbor, and her expressions of love extended to our creatures as well as ourselves. The result sometimes had unintended consequences.

When one houses pets, one learns the responsibility of caring for another creature. That means that when one vacations, or is to be absent for any length of time, one must make arrangements for “pet sitting.” Veterinarians of my youth, at least in my rural environment, gave most of their attention to large animals and boarded only animals that needed medical attention. Friends provided pet care, usually on a reciprocal basis. And such arrangements always had to be cleared with both sets of parents. Mrs. Newton, after conversations with me and with Mother, became our standard of care.

Caring for our free-range dogs was no problem. Even in the mild South Alabama winters they were fine sleeping in the basement, which was their custom. None ever slept indoors. In fact, like most of the dogs I knew, they were as outdoor as it was possible to be. The trick was to accommodate their eating customs. We fed them on the patio by the back door, save on those rare occasions when rain moved the feast to the basement. When we were gone, the feeder needed to put food in a proper place. Although she lived next door, having Mrs. Newton totter down the hill to our back door with food for the dog seemed a bit much for Mother, though she hadn’t a good alternative. In typical fashion, Mrs. Newton solved the problem herself: she just fed the dog at her own backdoor. Actually, I suspect she fed the dog in her own kitchen. Though she never admitted as much, the dogs’ willingness to enter her house when I went visiting provided the biggest clue. They always headed for the kitchen.

Knowing what to feed the dogs never posed a problem. They ate what we ate, with a few exceptions. They didn’t eat vegetables as a rule, and they didn’t eat chicken on the bone. But Mrs. Newton occasionally—probably often—found no dilemma at all about feeding the dogs. I discovered that she had taken a shine to Tip when she came down one day to say that she had made him some bread pudding, since she knew that he liked it so well. She never personally cared for the dessert, but it was one of her staples for sharing food with others. She never elaborated on how she learned of this canine predilection for bread pudding. And Mother later said that Tip wasn’t our first dog to be so favored. A cultivated taste for sweets had its drawback, though. Each of our dogs, as long as Mrs. Newton

lived next door (which was all my growing up years), became more picky about food as he aged.

Expressing love with food had no truly deleterious effect on any of us, except for the fish I briefly had. In her infinite wisdom, Mother decided that when I sought a Boy Scout Merit Badge on pets, I should have something more demanding than a free-range dog with which to earn it. So we settled on a small bowl with some goldfish. I dutifully learned to clean the bowl and refresh the water and feed them the proper amount at the proper times on my way to Boy Scout recognition. While I never bonded with them as I did with the dogs, somehow it didn't seem right to get rid of them when the allotted time required for the Merit Badge had passed. So I continued my care duties. Then we were going to be gone and Mrs. Newton offered to feed them for the few days of our absence. I cleaned the bowl before we left so that she would only have to feed them, gave her explicit instructions, provided a small food container, and blithely went my merry way.

When I returned, I trotted up the hill to knock on Mrs. Newton's back door, tell her of our return, thank her profusely, and return my fish to our house. I accomplished the first two objectives, only to have her tearfully say that the fish had died. She could not imagine what had happened. She had checked on them regularly and they had been fine. But in the morning they had been dead. She was sure that she had fed them carefully, for each time she checked there was no food atop the water in the bowl, so she added just a little. And each time the fish had avidly risen to gulp down her offerings. So she hoped that I bore her no ill will (though she didn't offer to replace them) and sent me on my way home with an empty (and uncleaned) bowl and her profuse (and mystified) apologies.